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PUBLICATIONS REVIEWED.

RIDGWAY'S "BIRDS OF NORTH AND MIDDLE AMERICA."

The Birds | of | North and Middle America: | A Descriptive Catalogue | of the | Higher Groups, Genera, Species, and Sub-species of Birds | Known to Occur in North America, from the | Arctic Lands to the Isthmus of Panama, | the West Indies and Other Islands | of the Caribbean Sea, and the | Galapagos Archipelago. | By | Robert Ridgway, | Curator, Division of Birds. | — | Part I. | Family Fringillidae — The Finches. | — | Washington; | Government Printing Office, | 1901. pp.i-xxx, 1-715, pl. I-XX. (= Bulletin No. 50, U. S. Nat. Mus.)

The first part of this long-expected work reached us early in November; and it has no doubt been examined by American ornithologists with more eagerness than any other bird volume which has appeared for many years. For here we expect to find the latest views of a man who has done more systematic work with American birds than any one else now living. Mr. Ridgway states his attitude in the "Preface" somewhat as follows:

Accepting evolution as an established fact, there cannot be any gaps in the series of existing forms, except such as are caused by the loss of intermediate types. If we had the power of retrospection all would be found to converge to common ancestors at remote periods. There is therefore in nature no such definite groups of individuals as a species, genus or higher group; and boundaries of the arbitrarily determined groups can only be fixed at gaps where connecting forms have disappeared. It thus happens that groups nominally of the same rank are often based on very unequal characters. All decisions in this regard must always vary more or less with personal opinion.

In regard to species and subspecies, two forms are treated as distinct species, if no geographical intergrades can be found to exist; otherwise the trinomial is used. But obviously, when closely related insular forms are to be treated, this rule fails, and here the author says that individual judgment comes into play, and the distinction made must be more or less arbitrary.

How far intermediate forms should be recognized by name, depends on the observer's ability to discern differences and estimate the degree of their constancy. And it is intimated that the future will find much finer distinctions sought out than now thought of. In the present work the author is governed only by his own judgment in this respect. "In all

cases it has been the author's desire to express exactly the facts as they appear to him in the light of the evidence examined, without any regard whatever to preconceived ideas,*** and without consideration of the inconvenience which may result to those who are inclined to resent innovations**. This question of species and subspecies and their nice discrimination is not the trivial matter that some who claim a broader view of biological science affect to believe. It is the very foundation of more advanced scientific work."

"Satisfactory decisions affecting the status of described but still dubious forms is a question both of material and investigation, and the author holds that no conclusion in such a matter should be accepted unless based upon an amount of material and careful investigation equal to that bestowed by the original describer." All of which seems to me very reasonable, and just now particularly pertinent!

Turning to the body of the book, we find that Mr. Ridgway starts out by drawing a distinction between two "different kinds of ornithology: *Systematic* or *scientific*, and *popular*." Under the former he would include only such matter as pertains to "the structure and classification of birds, their synonymies and technical descriptions." "The latter treats of their habits, songs, nesting, and other facts pertaining to their life-histories." This does not seem to me a fair discrimination. One is led at once to believe that "popular" ornithology as here understood is unscientific; and that systematic ornithology alone is scientific! This queer idea is further emphasized by the author's statement that "systematic ornithology, being a component part of Biology, the science of life, is the more instructive and therefore more important." This again I am not satisfied to accept. The author's attitude seems to be reflected in the present work, where are pages of synonymy, technical descriptions and measurements, all-important to the systematist to be sure; but the ecologist finds not a word as to food, habits, nidification or anything that would help him in the study of the relation of the species or race to its environment; or the factors governing its distribution, modification of habits and nesting. All of this seems to me of great *scientific* importance, perhaps in line with the discovery of the methods of the origin of species. And what about the student of migration, and the economist? Is their ornithological work necessarily "popular"? The term "popular" I had previously thought to apply to ornithology so simplified into vernacular language and freed from technicalities that it could be appreciated by every-day readers. But I revolt at the idea that Bendire's "Life Histories" is not scientific!

Besides the consideration of the higher groups of all North American birds, which

occupies twenty-three pages, the present volume deals exclusively with the Fringillidae or Sparrow Family. There are keys to the genera, species and subspecies, much after the style of Ridgway's "Manual," with pertinent descriptions, statements of distribution, and extended synonymies of each. "The descriptions are limited to essential characters," and in the case of subspecies to brief comparative diagnoses, with average measurements of available specimens.

The distribution of each form is stated in detail. Extreme localities are definitely named, and, if irregular, the range is accurately indicated. This feature is a most useful one to the student, and is far in advance of most previous systematic books. The time is past when a stated habitat like "Western United States," "Mountainous regions of the West," or even "California," is of any intrinsic value. It is to be hoped that the next A. O. U. check-list will follow Mr. Ridgway's precedent.

The most valuable part of the present work to the student of birds I believe to be the carefully prepared synonymy accompanying each description. This serves as an index to the literature of a species, as well as a guide to the systematic worker. In most cases a hint in parenthesis gives an idea as to the nature of the article referred to, or at least as to the locality to which it pertains.

In the matter of nomenclature, the A. O. U. Code is followed. Strict adherence to the original spelling of scientific names is maintained. "The correction of an author's orthographical errors is a pernicious practice." Vernacular names, however, are not quite up to date in that proper possessives retain the superfluous "'s'!"

As affecting California the author has made a few rulings open to question. In some cases I believe insufficient material has led to unwarranted acceptance or rejection of forms. For instance, a race of the spurred towhee, *Pipilo maculatus atratus*, is distinguished, the type being from Pasadena. [*Pipilo maculatus*] *megalonyx* was described by Baird from Fort Tejon which is only sixty miles from Pasadena and in practically the same faunal area. Moreover I have failed to find a single substantial character to separate a series of towhees from Pasadena and a series from the Sierras. Of the former only about one male out of three have the upper parts, including the rump, continuously black, this being the principal character assigned. On the other hand, Mr. Ridgway failed to recognize *Pipilo maculatus falcifer*, which has several discoverable characters, and which also represents a distinct faunal area. *Pipilo fuscus carolae* is admitted, but does not prove well-founded.

These points and others will all in time be worked out satisfactorily. Meanwhile we

must sincerely thank Mr. Ridgway for his immense expenditure of time and talent in the preparation of this invaluable monograph. The succeeding parts will be awaited with renewed anticipation. The whole work will form an absolutely necessary working manual for all twentieth century systematic ornithologists.

JOSEPH GRINNELL.

STORIES OF BIRD LIFE. By T. Gilbert Pearson. With illustrations by and under the supervision of Jno. L. Ridgway, pp. 236.

This is a popular work of 20 chapters given over to breezy narratives, and is in all respects a thoroughly model bird book, reflecting the varied experiences of the author's many years afield. The work is intended largely as a text-book for intermediate grades in schools but is nevertheless one of the most meritorious popular works which has appeared. It possesses a delight in that rhapsodic sentiment is lacking and the experiences of Mr. Pearson are given in a peculiarly interesting vein. After all, our writers have found nothing so productive of appreciation as the plain truth, simply told, which permits the beginner to evolve healthy conclusions.

Each chapter of the book treats of some individual species or else of some group amid its natural surroundings. Thus the opening chapter deals with "The Arredondo Sparrow Hawks," which for years established themselves in a certain grove and came to be familiarly known to the author. Charming indeed is "The Childhood of Bib-Neck," a chapter devoted to the early life of one of a brood of Wilson plover, which underwent a precarious infancy in the midst of preying hawks, piratical gulls and the omnipresent gunner along the ocean shore.

"An Old Barred Owl" is a chapter cleverly portraying the craftiness of a "swamp owl" who made frequent visits to the various farm-yards, only to be outwitted later by the inexorable grip of a steel trap, while his mate likewise fell prey to a "figuré-four" box and was summarily executed by an irate farmer. Each chapter of the book is peculiarly well rounded out. The plates by Mr. Ridgway are excellent while the numerous text figures lend much to the attractiveness of the volume. B. F. Johnson Publishing Co., Richmond, Va. Price 60 cents, postpaid.—C. B.

BIRDS OF SONG & STORY by Elizabeth and Joseph Grinnell is a popular bird book of 150 pages, illustrated by numerous color-type plates of mounted birds. The text is by Mrs. Grinnell who deals with a number of our best known birds in her usual charming manner, and the work should appeal to those who love popular bird literature. A. W. Mumford, Chicago.